EXPLORING QUEER POSSIBILITIES IN JEANETTE WINTERSOHN’S THE STONE GODS

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ABSTRACT

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Science fiction has always been a genre that explores unimaginable worlds and possibilities. Jeanette Winterson does just this in her novel *The Stone Gods*. In this project, I suggest that Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* is a narrative metaphor for how acts that oppose social norms may disrupt the repetition of norms and allow for queer, alternative identities and cultures. I offer this argument as one approach to how queer politics can continue its endeavors to recognize alternative identities, including blended identities in gender and sexuality, as well as alternative communities, including queer groups that encompass multiple identity categories. I first examine the android, Spike, and posit that Winterson uses Spike to demystify gender binaries and present a possibility of a blended identity. This blended identity is ultimately a fusion of a binary. Furthermore, Spike demonstrates Butler’s theory that subjects form an identity because of the social norms acting on the subject. Next, I posit that the novel also demystifies the romantic, subversive couple and instead explores how a queer collective might be more effective in subverting dominant society and norms. Here, Winterson presents a queer collective that aspires towards a queer utopia. As a result, the collective is able to imagine endless alternative communities for all identity categories. Ultimately, Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* explores possible queer, alternative identities and communities and supports the value of the continued imaginings of these alternatives.
To Cory

For letting me spend our first year of marriage with “Bill Shakespeare” and “cyborgs.”
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INTRODUCTION

“Every second the Universe divides into possibilities and most of those possibilities never happen. It is not a uni-verse—there is more than one reading. The story won't stop, can't stop, it goes on telling itself, waiting for an intervention that changes what will happen next.”

- Jeanette Winterson, The Stone Gods

Jeanette Winterson’s 2007 novel The Stone Gods explores a variety of topics. Some of these topics include global warming, pollution, capitalism, and war. The danger of technology is also a prominent topic in the novel. For example, humanity becomes reliant on technological advancements, such as robots, to take care of all the needs of humans. However, while technology seems to make life easier for humans—robots clean the house, artificial intelligence becomes one’s clothing stylist—Winterson shows a world in which technology fails to end the imminent and disastrous problems of global warming and war.

Despite their scientific discoveries (a cure to aging, human-like androids, womb-free pregnancies) the people of Orbus are unable to use science or technology to stop these harmful global issues. These technological advances initially sought to make life better, but instead brought forth harmful consequences. For instance, because robots bring ease and comfort to human life, all citizens desire to purchase their own assistant robot. As a result of this high demand for product, capitalism has replaced the government. Because corporations can meet the demands of the consumer and provide a product that takes care of all of life’s worries, a democratic government is no longer necessary—only capitalism. Now, corporations control police forces and create laws. Furthermore, the governing corporation, Central Power, uses their powers to spy on and control their own citizens with their own robot products. For example,
Central Power targets protagonist Billie Crusoe and uses computer parking meters to monitor her:

On one of the long line of vehicles—and only one, mine—a bright yellow laser-light is covering the windshield. That's my penalty notice. Unless I press the yellow button on the parking meter next to it, I will not be able to drive away because I will not be able to see out of my glass. It's a clever system—you have to accept guilt before you can drive away and protest your innocence. (Winterson 12)

Instead of using their technological abilities to fix oncoming disasters like global warming, Central Power cares more about their immediate power over citizens. Unlike other science fiction that glorifies the productive advancements technology may bring, Winterson seeks to shows how technology may be harmful once placed in the wrong hands: a corporation.

The novel begins in what appears to be a distant future on a planet called Orbus. This is a society of advanced technology, no aging, bodily perfection, sexual freedom, no government, corporation control, and Robo sapiens. These Robo sapiens are essentially robots that appear human. One particular Robo sapiens, Spike, has helped humanity discover a habitable planet. Orbus is dying due to pollution and war, yet this new planet, Planet Blue, represents hope. Given that humanity has essentially destroyed Planet Orbus, Billie explains what this discovery of Planet Blue means: “This time, we’ll be more careful. This time we will learn from our mistakes” (Winterson 6). In other words, Billie has hope that humanity will not “trash” this planet as they did with Orbus. However, when a space team goes to Planet Blue to rid the planet of dinosaurs, they make a mistake. The team had planned to make an asteroid collide into the
planet and trigger a mini ice age to kill the dinosaurs. Yet, they miscalculate and create a larger ice age than intended. Furthermore, the team, including Billie and Spike, are on Planet Blue when the asteroid hits and die as a result. This section ends, but the novel continues on to Easter Island in the 1800s where the native people have depleted their island of resources. Thus, a cycle of destruction and loss repeats. The reader assumes that the novel begins in the distant future after humanity has colonized Orbus, since the world Winterson presents has advanced technology and no date is ever given. She tricks the reader into believing the novel begins in the distant future, when really, Orbus harbored human civilization before Earth. She plays with scientific theories about humanity’s beginnings, particularly theories about how the dinosaurs died. Ultimately, Winterson presents a possible tale of humanity coming from Orbus to Earth. By placing the advanced civilization of Orbus in the distant past, Winterson implies that humanity has always brought forth destruction, whether it be caused by pollution, depletion of natural resources, or catastrophic loss of life, and that we will continue these same mistakes far into the future. Her message is evident as the final section displays a world, not too far from our own time, where we see the disastrous aftermath from World War III. This section shows that Earth is beginning to duplicate characteristics of Orbus, such as corporate control, war, and advanced technology.

Obviously, Winterson combines several important topics into one novel. However, underneath this surface of political issues, I posit that Winterson’s novel is most importantly a story about queer possibilities and the chance to explore trends in gender and sexuality. Typical of her previous novels, Winterson explores topics and themes such as identity, gender, and outcast characters—topics that are central to queer politics as well. She also incorporates
repetition into the novel, a motif that appears in her other novels as well. In The Stone Gods, Winterson repeats the destructive narrative of humanity, while focusing on the relationship of Spike and Billie and their reaction and choices within these dire narratives. While the repetition of the narrative may seem disheartening and seems to suggest that humanity will never learn from its mistakes, each time the narrative of Billie and Spike repeats, the characters get the chance to change the story and create something new. For example, Spike presents an alternative to the binary of the human/robot—as she is a being that contains both human and robotic traits. Similarly, in the middle of a civil war on Easter Island, Billie and Spike demonstrate an alternative way of life by not joining one of the two warring tribes on the island. The presentation of queer alternatives reaches its climax in the third section with the queer collective Wreck City, a collective that includes within itself a large variety of alternatives, even contradictory, identity categories and ideologies. I argue that the desire to reveal alternative identities, genders, and ideologies and the desire to subvert social norms is one of the major goals of queer politics. So rather than assessing the repetition as a failure to succeed, I view the novel’s repetition as a chance to try again and find an alternative solution, whether it be an alternative way of viewing one’s identity or an alternative society. The Stone Gods is a novel that welcomes the possibilities yet to come.

Furthermore, to support this argument, Winterson clarifies her non-pessimistic viewpoint in an interview about The Stone Gods with Liz Else. Winterson states, “I don’t want to sound like a ‘doom-monger’ because I’m not one. I’m optimistic. I do feel we have every chance, but not unless we’re realistic, both about our own negativity and our own possibility . . . But I hope everyone will also understand that the book is my manifesto for what we could have” (50 italics
mine). Underneath this surface of disaster, there is a glimmer of hope that comes through Winterson’s novel. This hope comes in many forms throughout the novel, such as miracles, second chances, evolution, friendship, community, and love. However, the most apparent evidence of humanity overcoming its mistakes occurs when the main characters evaluate the faults of their culture and then choose to rebel. These subversive acts occur on many different levels, from the individual to the collective. However, Winterson’s novel does not guarantee that culture will completely change for the better through subversive acts, but instead seems to suggest that these actions may potentially be one path towards alternative identities or identities that do not follow social norms. In relation to *The Stone Gods*, Billie’s identity is subversive since she does not follow the social norms of her culture. For example, the people of Orbus freeze their age, eat food that only comes from laboratories, and rely on technology to take care of all of their needs. Women freeze their ages usually at their mid-twenties to appeal to men, while men tend to freeze their age at a later age. This is the culture of Orbus, yet Billie has not frozen her age, she lives on a farm and eats real, organic food, reads from books, and has a real, live dog—not a Robo-paws. Billie’s choice to reject norms reveals that another type of identity and way of life is available. In other words, the novel presents a hopeful message that change is possible in a world of repetition. The people of Orbus enact and repeat the social norms of their culture, however, Billie demonstrates that one is able to break the cycle of repetition and choose something completely different, creating an alternative way of life.

In this project, I suggest that Jeanette Winterson’s novel *The Stone Gods* is a narrative metaphor for how acts that oppose social norms may disrupt the repetition of norms and allow for alternative identities and cultures. I offer this argument as one approach to how queer politics
—which challenge the idea that sexuality and gender are essential to identity, but instead sees them as socially constructed—can continue its endeavors to recognize alternative ways of life. Essentially, anyone or anything that stands in opposition to dominant norms is queer. Queer subjects do not follow the standards of mainstream social norms. If queer subjects continue to stand in opposition to norms, then they not only destabilize social norms, they also continually display for other subjects alternatives to these very norms. This is the power queerness holds. Ultimately, I posit that *The Stone Gods* demonstrates that queerness must continually oppose norms, so that new alternative identities and communities may always come about.

**Use of Key Terms**

I use the term “heteronormative” throughout this project. I define “heteronormative” as a term that refers to the discourses, systems, and social norms that come to be when heterosexuality is the dominant norm in culture. Samuel Chambers uses the term “heteronormative” in a similar sense: “I use the term heteronormativity quite consciously, in an effort to designate both the political power and the social structuring effects that heterosexuality has when it operates as a norm” (25 original italics). Likewise, my use of “heteronormative” refers to how heterosexuality affects and creates structures, systems, and power within culture. Ultimately, heterosexuality cannot exist without the presence of its social and gender norms.

Winterson presents her own version of heteronormativity on Orbus. The cultures of Orbus accept most sexual identities (with the exception of pedophilia), so prejudice against queer sexual identities is not a particular issue. Furthermore, babies are now born in labs, thus the heterosexual couple is not a necessity for reproduction. Therefore, what we define as
heteronormativity is not necessarily the same dominant ideology on Orbus. However, Winterson still presents a version of heteronormativity inasmuch as certain social and gender values related to heteronormativity exist. Men still sexually objectify women. Women also undergo extensive surgery to ensure their bodies are perfect and sometimes reverse their age to appeal to men. While we find a different version of heteronormativity in Winterson’s novel, I argue that the android Spike still demonstrates ways one may subvert norms, whether they are heteronormative or other social discourses.

I strive not to use the term “queer” in relation to sexuality exclusively. I believe that queer politics should not just be limited to the topic of sexual desire. I strive to include any subject or act that social norms deem atypical. My use of “queer” refers to not just homosexual desire but also includes the outcast, the oddball, the loner. Any subject who falls outside the norms of a system falls into my definition of the word “queer.” For example, the bi-racial subject may be queer in race politics since the subject’s mixture of races destabilizes binary models of race, that prioritize the black/white color line. In discourses about family, another queer subject could be the single father, since the father may take on the norms of both caregiver and provider. Essentially, the single father destabilizes the norm that the father’s space is at work, while the mother remains at home with family. The single father must do both. Eve Sedgwick also comments on the flexibility of the term “queer.” While Sedgwick primarily uses “queer” in relation to same-sex desire and feels that to take queer out of the context of same-sex desire would “dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself” (8), Sedgwick understands that other academics are using the term in relation to many other discourses: “[A] lot of the most exciting recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed
under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example” (9). In other words, some academics are using “queer” to discuss areas of identity that do not just relate to sexuality or gender. The term queer can be used in even broader contexts and David Halperin comments on this point: “There is nothing in particular to which [queer] refers” (62). I suggest that it is important to not just analyze gay and lesbian subjects in film and literature, but any identity that society deems queer or atypical. I propose that this examination of queer individuals reveals identities that oppose social norms and allows us to understand ways to overcome the repetition of normative identities.

The queer subject is a central figure in the The Stone Gods. Though Billie is a lesbian, on Orbus it is not this trait that makes her queer, since society accepts all sexual identities. However, Billie is one of the prime queer characters because she refuses to follow most social norms. As mentioned above, she has not frozen her age, she dislikes technology, she lives on a farm, and she understands written language. With Billie, Winterson demonstrates what it means to be queer and oppose social norms, yet does not relate her initial queerness to sexuality. Furthermore, Winterson also presents a broad range of queerness with the inhabitants of Wreck City. In this collective, Winterson presents queer characters who are not just outcasts due to their sexuality. In this city, the reader finds gypsies, car-loving hippies, vegans, and feminists, to name a few. Here, Winterson incorporates the queer figure on many different levels, from diet, race and economic outsiders, and general social outcasts. Winterson does not limit queerness just to sexuality, but presents all the different possibilities of queerness.
Performativity & Androids

First, I would like to introduce and provide background information about my core theorist for this project: Judith Butler. Butler’s work, which explores how gender is performatively constructed through the enactment of social norms, has been essential to the work of queer and feminist theories over the past few decades. One of Butler’s most important arguments asserts that the subject comes into a world made up of particular social and gender norms and as a result, this subject develops an identity based on these norms. Butler elaborates on this concept in an interview with Sara Salih: “[W]hat it means to be a subject is to be born into a world in which norms are already acting on you from the very beginning. What are these norms? There’s a certain regulation of the subject from the outset: you’re born in a hospital, you’re given a name, you’re ordered in that particular way; you’re assigned a gender, and very often a race” (“Changing the Subject” 341). Butler argues that social discourses concerning the gender, religion, race, and the subject’s particular experience with each discourse creates the subject’s identity. These particular discourses and norms, which each subject experiences differently, create a particular identity. If social norms act upon the subject from the beginning then “there is no transhistorical subject, but one that exists and can give an account of oneself in relation to the historical time and discourse” (Pirskanen 3). In other words, there is no pure subject that exists without the effects of history and discourse. Discourse shapes the norms available in society and as a result, the subject enacts traits that are performative of these norms, resulting in a belief in an inherent identity.

For Butler, identity is not stable because the subject enacts and repeats social norms to create identity. Since the performative repetition of norms creates a subject’s belief in an
essential identity, the demand for repetition creates the possibility of alterations in the repetition; the subject is then at some level capable of destabilizing these identity categories. For example, heteronormative social norms may dictate that a woman appear feminine, frail, and use sex appeal to attract a mate, as intelligence may ward off potential suitors. The woman continues to repeat these gender norms as these traits are performative of what a woman is, according to heteronormativity. The woman repeats norms to create a sense of self. Therefore, if repetition is how the subject generates a sense of identity, this repetition also ensures the continuation of heteronormativity. However, if the subject repeats social norms, yet were to implement slight variations—meaning norms that would not traditionally belong in the identity of a woman—in this very repetition, then the subject may be able to destabilized the supposed naturalness of available identity categories and furthermore, create new categories. Using the previous example, the woman may instead utilize her intelligence as a way to find a partner. While this woman still seeks a partner using traditional feminine characteristics, this slight change and use of intelligence, if done repetitively, may redefine what qualifies as an attractive woman and create a new way of being for the woman. Butler clarifies the idea that the very repetition that constitutes subjects and produces static identity categories may also bring forth possible alternatives to those identities: “[W]hile we are constituted socially in limited ways and through certain kinds of limitations, exclusions and foreclosures, we are not constituted for all time in that way; it is possible to undergo an alteration of the subject that permits new possibilities” (“Changing the Subject” 334).

Throughout this project, I focus largely on the android figure in Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*, as I feel that it represents an appropriate analogy for performative identity. Furthermore,
the android figure in *The Stone Gods* also metaphorically supports Butler’s challenges against the belief in essential identity. Like Butler’s theory that subjects form an identity because of the social norms acting on them, so too does the android, Spike, demonstrate that outside forces—such as codes and programming—act on the android, creating the belief in an inherent identity.

In my first chapter, I posit that the android Spike acts as a metaphor for the process whereby enacting norms repeatedly and performatively generates identity; such a process reveals that the idea of inherent identity is a myth. Like other cyborg and android figures, scientists construct not just Spike’s body, but also program Spike to carry out particular tasks and duties. While Spike’s primary goal is to assist humanity in discovering a habitable planet, Spike’s creators program her to perform tasks for the missions, whether it is to scan planets for forms of life or to sexually please the crew of the spaceship on which she travels. However, despite these codes that limit Spike to certain tasks and to a certain sense of identity, Spike demonstrates her ability to overcome her programming and begins to enact human characteristics, traits that are not part of her programming nor within her identity category. Ultimately, Spike demystifies binaries models in identity by presenting a blended identity of robot and human traits. While she still enacts some of the tasks in her programming, Spike also begins to enact human emotions such as love, empathy, and sadness that are expressly avoided in her programming. As a result, Spike destabilizes not just what it means to be a robot or a human, but challenges the concept of inherent human identity since she is able to performatively enact human characteristics such as emotions.

Furthermore, Spike demonstrates how alternative identities in gender, race, and class may come about. According to Butler, a subject that attempts to subvert traditional binary models of
identity still enacts available social norms. For example, a woman may reject female gender
norms and instead take on traditional male gender norms. While the woman demonstrates that
women are not limited to female gender norms, the woman still enacts available gender roles,
specifically that of a male. However, it is still these small disruptions and changes in the
repetition of social norms that may bring about alternative identities. Traditionally, a girl who
takes on more masculine characteristics such as perhaps aggression, wears clothes typically for
boys, and plays sports has come to be known as a “tomboy.” This enactment of boyish traits has
created a new and alternative identity, which collapses traditional traits of femininity and
masculinity. Ultimately, when the subject rejects the social norms of their identity category, the
subject reveals that there are other identity categories from which the subject might draw.
Through a close analysis of Spike, I argue that not only is Spike a fitting metaphor for
performative gender, but I also posit that the narrative of Spike demonstrates that small
subversive changes in the repetition of norms can bring subtle but surprising changes not just to
Spike, but to the cultures and societies within this book.

Queer Futurity on the Horizon

In his book *No Future*, Lee Edelman offers the argument that queer theory should resist
the concepts of reproduction and repetition, which are so dominant in heteronormativity.
Edelman ultimately takes the stance that heteronormativity places great value on the figure of the
child. R. Benjamin Bateman clarifies Edelman’s view: “[T]he face of the child . . . coerces us—
through conjuring our compassion—into subordinating our present wants and enjoyments to the
always-deferred, future needs of ‘innocent’ children” (“The Future of Queer Theory” 171). In
other words, the model of heteronormativity is one that functions solely for the future of the child. Thus, anyone who stands against this futurity and this stability of heteronormative society ultimately stands against the innocent child. Edelman elaborates on this concept:

Hence, whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends. (11)

Edelman posits “that queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (3). Edelman might critique queer individuals who attempt to assimilate into heteronormativity. For example, if a gay or lesbian couple were to enact the norm of the nuclear family, they would only be repeating a heteronormative lifestyle1.

Instead, Edelman suggests that queers reject all forms of dominant culture and calls this rejection an “antirelational turn.” Jaana Pirskanen sums up Edelman’s goal efficiently:

“[Edelman] asks if all political visions have to be visions about the future, and suggests that queers have to take on the burden of negativity. The value of queerness lies in its motivation to embrace the refusal of the social and political order” (8). The concept of the child and futurity represents hope, thus society accepts only the repetition of norms that ensure the future of the child. If the queer subject rejects these socials norms, the subject will represent negativity since

1 Lisa Duggan coined the term “homonormativity,” defining it as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggen 179).
the subject does not promote the futurity of the child. Like Michael Warner, in *The Trouble With Normal*, who argues that “queers should contest all social norms and defend everything heterosexuals find detestable in queer culture—promiscuous sex, bathhouses, pornography, drugs and so on” (Bateman 171), so too does Edelman argue that queerness should stand for abortion rights and any other forms of anti-futurism and embrace the negativity that comes with these issues. For Edelman, the continued political action for queers to assimilate into heteronormative society, to essentially be no different than the heterosexual subject, only continues heteronormativity. Bateman clarifies this concept: “[W]hen gays and lesbians respond by insisting that they value marriage, children, and their society’s future—and not simply the ephemeral delights of sex and drugs, as conservatives would have it—they abandon the subversive force of queer sexuality” (“The Future of Queer Theory” 171). Instead, queers should always take the side against the child or in other words, they should always strive to stand in opposition to heteronormativity. For Edelman, this is the only path that will disrupt the heteronormative model.

However, I suggest that Winterson’s novel provides an alternative path to the disruption of discourse, including heteronormativity. In contrast to Edelman’s belief that the future is for the child, I posit that Winterson’s novel demonstrates a concept similar to José Muñoz’s argument about queer futurity. Rather than assigning queerness to a space of negativity that is in opposition to heteronormativity, Muñoz believes that queerness is a space that we should continually aspire towards. Ultimately, Muñoz aspires towards a queer utopia. Using this concept of Muñoz’s queer utopia as a foundation for my argument predominantly in Chapter 2, I define queer utopia as an group aspiration towards a place where multiple variations of identities exist, together, without
discrimination. We may never reach the kind of utopia of which Muñoz writes, but this is his point. If we continue to aspire towards utopia, then we will continue to imagine alternative societies and identities. So rather than taking on the burden of negativity and taking a separatist approach where queers are in opposition to heteronormativity, the hopeful imagining of alternative societies can generate new ways of living. Muñoz’s utopia does reject current norms; however, this concept of queer utopia is still proactive as it strives to imagine a world where all dreams and desires are represented and viable.

This same sort of longing for alternative societies is present in The Stone Gods. The novel propels the reader through three different time periods. In each time period, a similar story about Billie and Spike and the society they inhabit repeats. While each section presents a tale about the downfall of society and the demise of Billie and Spike, each section relays a message of hope as characters dream of a utopian space, where society will no longer continue to make harmful mistakes. Even though each section ends in some sort of loss, and tangible changes in society never truly come forth, what is notable is that characters still dream of utopian spaces where alternative identity types may exist. Furthermore, the repetition of these similar stories further emphasizes this continued aspiration for hope and movement away from tragedy. In other words, even though each section displays a flawed society, we still find characters who continue to hope for alternatives and change in society.

The third section is the most notable part of the novel, as this is where Winterson presents a queer collective called Wreck City. In contrast to the previous two sections, where individual characters, particularly Billie, longed for utopian societies, the third section introduces a queer group that collectively longs for and attempts to build an alternative society. Wreck City
is a rebel collective of individuals and groups that have left the capital, Tech City. These subjects have chosen to leave due to Tech City’s controlling laws and have found a home in Wreck City where they have the freedom to be whoever they want to be. Wreck City is intriguing as it is a space where differing collectives live together and work together. Groups do not antagonize others, but rather respect and acknowledge each other’s differences. Therefore, Wreck City aspires to be a type of queer utopia. I do not posit that Wreck City is a true utopia as the community is always in conflict with Tech City and rejects groups and individuals that may promote the laws of Tech City and therefore does not truly tolerate the ideologies of all individuals. However, Wreck City’s presence reveals to others that there are other ways to live in society. Furthermore, even though Tech City eventually defeats Wreck City, this ending suggests that another queer collective may rise up and aspire towards utopia as well, which may result in a new and different alternative society. This new collective may present another way of living in the world. The failure of Wreck City to stabilize and reach their dream of a queer utopia is not hopeless, since the repeated narrative in the novel suggest that a new collective will form and re-imagine another alternative society with its own diverse queer community.

In Chapter 2, I posit that Billie goes through a journey from singularity to collectivity. At first, Billie rejects social norms and secludes herself from society. She refuses to freeze her age, she is wary of technology, and she choses to live on an isolated farm. Furthermore, Billie does not seem to have any close friendships. She is a solitary character because of her queer lifestyle choices and beliefs. However, after meeting Spike, Billie learns how to engage in a romantic relationship with another queer subject. This relationship is valuable since it teaches Billie how to interact with other individuals and care for someone other than herself. However, even though
Billie and Spike engage in a meaningful relationship, it is queer to society since it is illegal for a human and android to have romantic relations. In a sense, Billie and Spike also desire a utopian space where their relationship may exist without prejudice. In many ways, Billie and Spike fit the formula of star-crossed lovers. While Spike and Billie desire for their relationship to be accepted, it is common for an “intervention of larger, structural, or otherwise powerful forces [to] impede the progress of romance or may even end it all together” in these tragic romances (Dowd 552). Yet, despite the couple’s tragic end, critics sometimes assess the star-crossed lovers as hopeful and idealistic since they stand in opposition to social norms. While this is true, and Spike and Billie similarly stand in opposition to norms, their subversive acts are not for the greater whole. I suggest that this romantic relationship does not necessarily equate to a queer collective or utopia. I build the argument that a queer utopia must include multiple identities and desires. While a romantic relationship includes two subjects, this relationship creates a singular aspiration for a utopian space, as the couple’s imagining for an alternative society is specific to their own desire.

In contrast, because Wreck City includes multiple subjects and because Wreck City seeks to meet all the desires of these various subjects, it is necessarily that the collective rebel against the entire government of Tech City. In *The Stone Gods*, Wreck City must challenge not just a single law (in Billie and Spike’s situation, the law against human and android relations), but rather the entire government of Tech City. The inhabitants of Wreck City left Tech City for multiple reasons, including invasive surveillance in the form of “tracking devices in vehicles” and “compulsory fingerprint database” (Winterson 130). Furthermore, money no longer exists in Tech City and instead, citizens rent everything, from property to commercial products, which
results in the disappearance of ownership. Ultimately, the government controls and decides everything. These new regulations affect multiple groups and individuals, thus restricting subjects from thinking and acting in ways they desire. In order for Wreck City to continue to aspire towards a queer utopia, they must attempt to change the dominant system of Tech City, which prohibits multiple groups and individuals from reaching their own desires and from also reaching a culture of co-existing identities and ideologies.

Thus, I argue that Winterson’s novel reveals the importance of not just queer collectivity, but also the importance of aspiring towards a queer utopia. Winterson’s presentation of a queer collective not only suggests that strength in numbers is more likely to disrupt dominant discourse, but also suggests that a collective of multiple identities is likely to act for the desires of many, therefore resulting in an aspiration towards a queer utopia, where all identity categories may exist. I suggest that in *The Stone Gods* Winterson creates a queer collective that not only works together to subvert dominant society and norms, but also creates a collective that aspires towards a queer utopia. This queer collective demonstrates two important themes: to act subversively and to dream subversively. The queer collective in *The Stone Gods*, Wreck City, acts to reveal the destructive work done by the dominant society, Tech City. This is the collective’s subversive act. However, the collective also represents the hope for utopia, a multi-faceted place where all identities exist and work together. This is the collective’s dream. Again, the novel does not necessarily present a true queer utopia, but it is more so that the subjects of Wreck City continually aspire towards this utopia and thus repeatedly imagine potential alternative societies.
Ultimately, this project’s aim is to reveal how Jeanette Winterson’s novel *The Stone Gods* presents a hope for alternative identities, communities, and ideologies. Her use of science fiction, queer theory, and identity politics not only creates a truly unique narrative, but also present a critique about social norms and suggests options that might disrupt the norms discourse shapes. Not only does the novel hope for spaces where multiple identities may exist, but also presents multiple ways to subvert discourse so that alternative identities and communities may come forth. Whether it be the subject who may repeatedly subvert social norms and as a result, bring new meaning to these norms or the queer collective that repeatedly aspires towards a queer utopia, Winterson’s presentation of these multiple paths to alternative identities and communities reinforce the message that there is hope on the horizon. However, the important concept in both of these options is repetition. In order for any new possible identities and ideologies to come about, the queer subject or collective must repeatedly act subversively.

Judith Butler provides a pragmatic and real-life example of how repetition may eventually bring alternative identities. In her interview with Sarah Salih, Butler discusses the evolution of the term “queer.” For a long time, the term was considered an injurious speech act. Butler confessed her fear of the word as well. Yet, other scholars eventually approached Butler and asked for her thoughts about creating a journal called *Queer Theory*. Butler was shocked by this suggestion:

I was still in its grip. I was still thinking, “Must we take on this word? Isn’t it too injurious? Why do we need to repeat it at all?” I still think there are words that are in fact so injurious that it’s very hard to imagine that they could be repeated in a productive way; however, I did note that using the word *queer* again and again as
part of an affirmative practice in certain contexts helped take it out of an
established context of being exclusively injurious, and it became about reclaiming
language, about a certain kind of courage, about a certain kind of opening up of
the term, *about the possibility of transforming stigmatization into something more
celebratory.* (351 italics mine)

This is how one may subvert through repetition. A repeated use of a word or the repeated
combination of opposing social traits with a slight change in meaning or purpose can ultimately
bring about a new perspective and definition to these very words or identities.
CHAPTER 1: “PASS ME THE SCREWDRIVER”: THE CONSTRUCTED AND PERFORMATIVE CYBORG

“She has no blood. She can't give birth. Her hair and nails don't grow. She doesn't eat or drink. She is solar-powered. She has learned how to cry.”

- Jeanette Winterson, The Stone Gods

In their Introduction to Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture, Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth provide a brief background about the evolution of science fiction. They note that “science fiction has long been thought of as a ‘masculine’ genre, as a genre written by male authors for male readers” (3). However, during the 1930s and 1940s, several female writers became major figures within the genre. The science fiction genre was “‘liberating’ for women because it allow[ed] for the imagining of oppositional social and sexual categories—in particular, for the imagining of alternative notions of gender and gender roles” (Flanagan and Booth 3). For example, Suzie McKee Charnas and other feminist science fiction authors have attempted to create narratives about feminist rebellion and gender separatism. Charnas’ Motherlines follows a female protagonist who escapes slavery from her male masters and soon joins an all-female tribe that rises up to win back their homeland. Pamela Sargent’s The Shore of Women also depicts a postnuclear utopian world where women rule the land and have exiled men into the wilderness. In these stories not only are communities separated by gender, but they also depict women as the superior gender. Austin Booth and Mary Flanagan note that these types of science fiction novels cite gender separatism as a “precondition for cultural and social change” (5). In other words, science fiction writers saw gender separatism as a way to destabilizes social norms—particularly gender norms.
However, while these separatist novels aim to present alternative gender norms, these novels actually continue to reinforce gender binaries. By continuing this opposition between man and woman, these narratives restrict women to specific characteristics and continue to define woman in opposition to man. Veronica Hollinger comments on this problem: “[A]n emphasis on gender risks the continuous reinscription of sexual binarism, the heterosexual opposition which historically has proven so oppressive for so many women” (24). While these women writers sought to create powerful female characters and sought to redefine the female gender in their novels, they continued to reinforce a binary model of gender. Hollinger furthers this concept, noting that gender separatist narrative “critiques of sex and gender polarities often leave [sex and gender] polarities in place” (25). These science fiction worlds may be futuristic, but conceptually, the novels continue the belief that there are distinct differences between sexes. Even though the novels may redefine the identity of women, the novels imply that women must adhere to a certain set of traits, therefore ostracizing any woman whose persona may not follow these particular characteristics. These gender binaries can leave identity categories stable, rather than encouraging new identities—new genders, for example—to emerge. Furthermore, this continuation of gender binaries also promotes the belief that there are inherent traits for each gender, when rather, these gender norms are fabrications shaped by heteronormativity.

Unlike its predecessors, I posit that Jeanette Winterson’s recent science fiction novel, *The Stone Gods*, attempts to overcome identity binaries and destabilize norms through the character Spike. As an android, Spike begins to take on human characteristics, like emotion, therefore destabilizing her identity as a robot. She is no longer a robot, nor entirely human. Instead, Spike has a blended identity and becomes something entirely new and undefinable. Ultimately, her
existence confuses the boundaries between robot and human with the result that the binary model of robot and human becomes unstable. Furthermore, by destabilizing the binary model of robot and human, Spike demonstrates that these two identity categories do not have inherent or fundamental characteristics. Robots are not confined to a particular programming, nor do humans have an essential set of traits that are only inherent to them. Since Spike demonstrates that she is capable of enacting the characteristics of a human, she challenges the belief in inherent humanness. Ultimately, Winterson’s narrative complicates the binary models of human/robot and therefore is comparable to the subject who may complicate the binary model of gender. Spike embodies the idea that the subject may destabilize gender binaries by enacting norms and characteristics of both genders. As a result, the subject may not be clearly gendered as a woman or man.

Spike is most useful in understanding how particular sets of characteristics are not essential to a particular identity category. Scientists give Spike an internal programming that she is expected to follow. With this programming, the scientists try to ensure that Spike performs certain tasks, such as analyze planets or solve problems. Therefore, Spike’s sense of self is not something that comes from within her, but from outside of her. Here, Winterson sets up a comparison between android construction and identity construction of humans. Winterson’s novel implies that a subject’s identity is like a code. The character Billie comments on this dilemma of a “coded” identity: “It has been the same all my life because my mother set the numbers that way, coded me, programmed me, and although it is possible to play with the numbers, I can’t break the shape” (Winterson 127). Similarly, discourse shapes norms and the particular identity categories available for subjects. The subject does not have a core essence that
comes from within him or her. Rather, the subject’s identity is shaped by outside forces, such as social norms.

Furthermore, Spike’s enactment of human traits demonstrates how one may destabilize the concept of inherent traits in identities and as a result, create new identity categories. Typically, the science fiction genre depicts androids as physically constructed and internally coded machines, created to carry out particular duties and tasks. While this depiction of an android is not uncommon in science fiction, Winterson’s android evolves into something entirely new. Throughout the novel, Spike continues to enact characteristics that make up the robot identity. She serves humanity, she analyzes planets, she meets the sexual needs of space crew members, she is logical and objective. This is Spike’s purpose and her original identity.

However, as Spike witnesses the traits and norms of humanity, Spike demonstrates multiple times that she is capable of breaking her core programming and changing her identity. As an android, Spike has no need for emotions; however, she begins to enact and repeat human emotions such as love and sadness. Ultimately, Spike demonstrates her ability to break free from her programming as she enacts and repeats characteristics that were once outside her identity category, particularly human characteristics. As a result, Spike becomes something not entirely robotic, nor entirely human. She collapses the boundaries between human and robot and simultaneously reveals that there is no inherent definition for these two identity categories; in doing so she presents an entirely new way of being: she presents an alternative identity that is both human and robotic.

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2 Classic characters such as Star Wars’ R2-D2 and C-3PO assist their human masters with their adventures, but remain generally static in their character development. Their internal computer programming remains the same, therefore their personas remain the same as well. Similar static android characters include the terminators from James Cameron’s Terminator and the cybermen from the British TV Show Doctor Who.
My aim in this chapter is to argue that Winterson’s Spike is a useful metaphor for not just understanding how discourse shapes norms and identity categories, but also demonstrates that subjects may subvert norms in order to destabilize identity categories, including gender, which results in the creation of new identity categories. Ultimately, Spike demystifies binary models of identities and presents the possibility of blended identities. First, I posit that Spike reveals how society’s desire to limit identity categories to a particular set of characteristics creates a belief in inherent identity. I use Donna Haraway’s interpretation of the cyborg, which demonstrates the problem of seeking a natural gender and the faultiness of an inner essence, to guide the discussion. Next, I explore how Spike also reveals the constructed nature of identity. If identity is not inherent, then identity must be a product of the subject’s performative enactment of norms. Like the robot who is programmed to enact particular tasks, Spike demonstrates, metaphorically, that subjects are coded by the norms they performatively enact. I incorporate Judith Butler’s theory about performative gender to support my point. Finally, using Butler’s thoughts on subversive action, I propose that Winterson’s Spike is a character who attempts to disrupt her own programming by enacting and repeating human characteristics such as love and sadness, which are outside of her identity category. Like Spike who creates a blended identity category of a human and a robot, so too can the subject create blended identities by collapsing binaries within the broader categories of gender, race, and class by enacting and repeating norms from outside their identity category. For example, we now have the establish identity of the “tomgirl” which includes male and female characteristics. Not only does this enactment of traits and norms outside of one’s identity challenge the belief of inherent identity, but also reveals the possibility
of other ways of being. It is this subversive act that allows for re-imaginings of identities, including gender.

The Myth of Inherent Identity

In a world of incredibly advance technology, the creation of Robo sapiens on Orbus was a large breakthrough. Certainly Orbus left nothing to imagination in creating robots for any type of task, such as “Kitchenhand for the chores, Flying Feet to run errands or play football with the kids ... Garagehand—that’s the big hairy one that’s good with a spanner” and even “Lend-a-Hand, for the temporarily unpartnered” (Winterson 14). However, the contrast between these simple robots and Robo sapiens is still quite noticeable. Billie describes the stark difference while a “BeatBot” gives her a traffic ticket:

The BeatBot shuffles off in his oversized nano-parka with intelligent hood.

The hood is the bit that processes information—the rest of the Bot is just a moving lump of metal—which is what all robots are, when you come down to it, until the big breakthrough.

Robo sapiens.

As far away from the BeatBot as the Neanderthal Man is from us.

(Winterson 14)

Even before Spike reveals how she can enact human characteristics and destabilize the boundaries between the identity categories of human and robot, the creation of Robo sapiens pushes the boundaries of what is robot and what is human: “The first artificial creature that looks and acts human, and that can evolve like a human—within limits, of course” (Winterson 14).
Unlike the primitive BeatBot who merely cites humans for traffic violations, Spike was built specifically for the space mission to Planet Blue, where she helped humanity in their endeavor to colonize the planet. However, like all Robo sapiens, Spike is programmed by her creators to enact multiple tasks. Essentially, all Robo sapiens are highly advance robots and their abilities not only meet the abilities of humans, but sometimes also far exceed those of humans. Billie details these abilities: “They remember everything—faces, information, numbers, conversation—and they can make connections. These are robots who join the dots. Ask them for advice, and they will give it to you: impartial advice based on everything that can be known about the situation. Ask them what you were doing this time two years ago, and they will tell you” (Winterson 15).

Ultimately, Robo sapiens push the boundaries of what it means to be a robot since they do not just simply repeat one task over and over, like the simple BeatBot. They evolve and learn from their experiences. Furthermore, like humans, Robo sapiens can use their judgment to make decisions and act freely—to an extent. So, while Robo sapiens are the most advance creations on Orbus and even look and act like humans, humanity still regards them as robots. Billie also comments on this attitude of Robo sapiens: “The great thing about robots, even these Robo sapiens, is that nobody feels sorry for them. They are only machines” (Winterson 6). Ultimately, because Robo sapiens enact and repeat the programming created for them by scientists, they stay within the confines of a robot identity. By definition, a robot is a constructed being, created by humanity to perform particular tasks and assist humanity. Ultimately, despite their advance abilities, Robo sapiens fit within this criterion as well.
However, Spike complicates the original programming the scientists created for her when she begins to enact characteristics that are not part of programming—particularly human characteristics and emotions such as the ability to cry and love. Essentially, Spike’s sense of self is not limited to how her scientists program her, even though her creators aim to define her and limit her to certain abilities such as logic and problem-solving. As an android, Spike is expected to take on the role of “robot” and remain within this identity category. However, Spike is no longer just purely a robot since she demonstrates human characteristics. She even defines herself as a gendered human during a conversation with Billie about Spike’s sexual relations with the space crew during their mission to Orbus. Billie questions Spike’s sexual acts with the space crew:

“I’m assuming you’re not talking about sexual service here.”

“What else is there to do in space for three years?”

“But inter-species sex is illegal.”

“Not on another planet it isn’t. Not in space it isn’t.”

“But you were also the most advanced member of the crew.”

“I’m still a woman.” (Winterson 28)

This is the first time we see the complexity of Spike in the novel. She is not a static, coded machine who simply carries out tasks because her internal programming instructs her to do so. Spike sees herself as something other than just a Robo sapiens. Because Spike lives in world where gendered individuals exist, this gender discourse shapes her and gives her a sense of identity as a woman. Spike’s creators gave her a female body and gender discourse dictates that a subject with female body parts is a woman. Therefore, social norms dictate that Spike should
also identify as a woman. Spike’s response, “I’m still a woman,” is left ambiguous and is never fully explained. As a result, her response is open to many interpretations. On one hand, she seems to imply that though her programming dictates that one of her core roles as a Robo sapiens is to satisfy the sexual needs of crew members, this programming still does not completely control her own personal sexual needs. She has sexual desires because she identifies as a woman and does not merely carry out sexual deeds because her programming instructs her to do so. Her response seems to justify these sexual relations not as something she was programmed to do, but something she wanted and took pleasure in as well. On the other hand, because Spike identifies with women, she may be unconsciously enacting and repeating the norm that women should meet and service the sexual desires of men. While Spike may believe she is rejecting her robot programming, she still falls victim to female social norms. In either case, Spike’s ambiguous, but surprising response reveals the complexities with identity construction. From the conscious level, Spike reveals her conscious effort to remove herself from the identity as a robot. However, on the unconscious level, Spike may unknowingly enact female gender norms due to social expectations.

Of course, Spike’s insistence that she is a woman surprises Billie. Spike’s departure from her robotic programming reveals that not all Robo sapiens are the same and that to designate a particular set of traits to the robot identity is inaccurate. Spike’s situation harkens to Donna Haraway’s argument in her essay “The Cyborg Manifesto Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” in which Haraway argues against feminist platforms that appoint women a particular set of supposed inherent traits. Haraway also uses a science fiction figure to make her point: the cyborg. Haraway’s argument insists that the subject’s belief
in an inherent identity limits the creation of new identities and other ways of being. In her essay, Haraway details her interpretation of the cyborg as a key figure in the task of rethinking gender. She makes “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” and asserts that feminists need to move beyond the need to define the female gender as these definitions limit the identity of women to specific traits (150). This is where the cyborg figure becomes useful. For the cyborg to have a single and particular definition would be a contradiction in itself. The cyborg is meant to be a mixture of two opposites, therefore, it collapses binaries. The cyborg may be both male and female, both organic and machine, yet simultaneously neither male nor female, neither organic nor machine. The cyborg does not dwell on these polarities of identity nor seek to define itself. Gill Kirkup discusses the unique characteristics of Haraway’s metaphorical cyborg: “Haraway’s cyborg is not a member of the liberal humanist world. It is not concerned to differentiate itself from other forms of creature, or from machines; its identity does not rest in its individuality” (4). In other words, the cyborg does not seek to define itself in contrast to others nor does it seek organic wholeness (Haraway 150). Ultimately, Haraway asks that feminists do not seek to assign woman a particular set of traits, as doing so leads to excluding some women from the category of proper womanhood, therefore limiting the number of ways one can be woman in the world.

Even though Spike still often times continues to carry out her robotic programming, she can still experience human traits and desires. Because Spike takes on human traits, which are not part of the particular set of traits in her identity category, Spike blurs the boundaries between human and robot, therefore complicating her own identity category as a robot. After learning about Spike’s sexual relations with the crew members, Billie presents her own confusion about
Spike: “I wanted to be outraged on this woman’s behalf, but she isn’t a woman, she’s a robot, and isn’t it better that they used a robot instead of dispatching a couple of sex-slaves?” (Winterson 28). However, it is this confusion between identity categories that makes alternative identities possible. Subjects do not merely have one particular set of inherent characteristics, but rather, each subject has their own set of unique characteristics based on the social norms with which they identify. Haraway presents a similar point in relation to feminists who seek to uncover an essential definition of woman. Haraway posits that feminists should give up their goal of uncovering an organic female gender since a woman cannot be generalized by particular traits: “There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (155). Haraway posits that a woman is not just a collection of a particular set of characteristics, but rather, each woman can have a unique set of characteristics, different from the next woman, due to the norms the woman experiences. In other words, the subject will never discover a true essence because discourse shapes norms and as a result, also shapes and creates available identity categories.

“I is for Identity”

Because Spike enacts human characteristics, she reveals that her identity is not solely based on her programming. Furthermore, she reveals that she is not just limited to the traits designated to robots. However, because her physical and internal construction is obvious, it is also clear that Spike has no internal essence or identity from the start. As a result, Spike also
demonstrates how any sense of identity is a constructed fabrication and therefore performative.

Judith Butler produced this concept of performativity, which focuses primarily on the
performative aspects of gender, in her ground-breaking book Gender Trouble. Annamarie Jagose
clarifies Butler complex argument about performativity: “Consequently, there is nothing
authentic about gender, no ‘core’ that produces the reassuring signs of gender. The reason ‘there
is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender’ is ‘that identity is performatively
constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its result’” (84). Similarly, Spike does
not have an internal identity immediately at her creation; rather, she gains a sense of self by
performatively enacting human characteristics. As a result, Spike challenges concepts of
humanness since she demonstrates that human characteristics can be learned and enacted.

In the third section of the novel, Billie is a scientist who educates Spike about humans:
“And so every day begins for us—as I teach a robot to understand what it means to be human.
She has all the information, all the education, but if you are not a human, how do you
begin?” (Winterson 135). Because Spike has no essential human identity, she does not know how
to navigate through human culture. While Spike looks like a human, she is still a piece of
technology. Her teachers must instruct her how to interact with humanity; they do so by teaching
her human history. Like the subject whose identity forms because of his or her exposure to social
norms, so too does Spike’s sense of self form as she learns about the immense stretch of human
history and social norms. This is the only way Spike may gain understanding of humanity and a
sense of self, even if this sense of self is fabricated. In both the first and third section, she learns
to take on the performative traits of a human in general. She smiles, tells jokes, and laughs. For
example, Spike laughs when a human asks if robots will overthrow humans and even makes a
small joke about it: “‘Revenge of the Robots?’” (Winterson 80). A robot with no human characteristics may answer the question with logic, perhaps stating that an uprising would only be necessarily to ensure the continued survival of robots. Spike’s humor is not required for a computer or android to function. Her actions are not natural for a robot, but are merely enactments which results in the sense of an internal identity.

Judith Butler also dissects the complex nature of identity construction in relation to gender. She argues that discourses act upon the subject from the beginning; there is no inherent identity within the subject. Therefore, if discourses shape norms and identity, then identity categories and gender are performative of the norms discourse creates and shapes. Butler writes the following on performative gender:

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured. (136 original italics)

In other words, subjects infer that their actions represent this internal identity that resides within them. However, these actions occur only on the “surface of the body” and thus represent the absence of an internal identity. Therefore, these actions are only performative, but the subject
infers these actions to be natural and internal. Spike’s programming is comparable to the social norms that act on the subject and therefore create a sense of identity. In other words, the programming first provides the traits of her robot identity. Spike does not have an internal identity first. Her identity is given to her by outside forces—her programming and her scientists who create the programming. Discourse is like a computer program that shapes appropriate identity categories and norms for subjects.

Granted, Spike is a constructed being from the start. As a Robo sapiens, Spike was literally created by humans, from her appearance to her internal programming, which instructs her how to act in various situations. Obviously, Spike’s identity as a robot is a construction, as well. However, as Spike begins to enact the characteristics of humans—and does so quite well—she reveals that even human identity categories are constructed as well. Society tends to believe that each person is born with a particular identity and a core essence which belongs only to them. However, Spike is a being literally constructed by scientists. She has no inner essence. Thus, Spike is a helpful metaphor in unpacking how discourse shapes identities. She is constructed being, thus she has no essential core, and therefore any identity she enacts is merely performative of the traits and norms she portrays. Similarly, as Butler would argue, the human subject does not have an inherent identity either, therefore the subject enacts norms that are available in society, however, it is the subject’s performative enactment of the norms that creates the belief in an inherent identity. This means that all available identities are shaped by society, including those that may not promote heteronormativity, such as gay and lesbian identities. Michel Foucault notes how discourses that created, defined, and managed sexuality began to appear in the nineteenth century, especially in relation to homosexuality: “[L]iterature of a whole series of
discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality ... made possible a strong advance of social controls in this area of ‘perversity’” (101). Even though a subject may identify as gay, this subject is still enacting norms of an identity that are socially available, whether this means a female dressing in masculine clothing (which is a social norm that belongs to the male identity category) or just the mere performativity of a lesbian identity, since this identity category circulates in discourse and now has its own space as an identity. Likewise, Spike performatively enacts the available traits of humanity, resulting in a sense of self. Ultimately, Spike destabilizes the belief in an innate human identity because she is a constructed machine that enacts what are thought to be human characteristics. As a result, she reveals the performative nature of humanity in general.

Spike particularly demonstrates her ability to enact both robot and human qualities during an interview with Billie in the first section. The performative qualities of these two roles become apparent when Spike switches back and forth between characteristics of a robot and human. During an interview, Billie asks Spike about the purpose behind dismantling Robo sapiens after important missions:

“If your data can be transferred, as is happening now, then why must we dismantle you when you cost so much to build?”

“I am not authorized to answer that question,” she says, with perfect robot control. Then she leans forward and takes my hand and she says, “It is because I can never forget.”

“What? I don’t understand. We take the data...”

“And I can recall it.”
“But you can’t—it’s vast, it’s stored computer data. When it’s downloaded, the host, the carrier, whatever you are, sorry, can be wiped clean. Why aren’t you a machine for re-use?”

“Because I am not a machine.” (Winterson 29 italics mine)

First, it is important to note how easily Spike switches from robot to something more than a machine. Billie notes Spike’s initial response as robotic (”I am not authorized to answer that question”), but immediately after her response, Spike portrays a hint of humanity as she takes Billie’s hand. Initially, Spike merely repeats the phrase that she is coded to say when asked a classified question. However, her next response, which answers Billie’s questions, suggests that Spike is only acting out the part of the robot. Furthermore, Spike uses her own free will, a characteristic of humanity, and decides to answer Billie’s question. This moment is one of the many times Spike actively disobeys her programming.

I am not suggesting that Spike is merely performing identities at her convenience. While the previous example demonstrates Spike’s ability to shift back and forth between the characteristics of a human and robot, Spike’s portrayal of human characteristics is not always a conscious decision. For example, Spike’s ability to love Billie seems natural and genuine. However, as a robot, there is no logical reasoning as to why Spike has an understanding of emotion, especially love. As a constructed machine, Spike should have no understanding of emotion. Yet, Spike’s portrayal of love for Billie seems very much real and part of her concept of her self. The depth of Spike’s love is apparent as Spike states what she believes to be her final goodbye to Billie: “Spike came forward and put her arms around me. ‘One day, tens of millions of years from now, someone will find me rusted into the mud of a world they have never seen,
and when they crumble me between their fingers, it will be you they find” (Winterson 79).

Similarly, we may compare Spike’s portrayal of a human trait—love—to perhaps a woman who enacts many masculine norms and traits. Both Spike and the woman enact a trait that does not belong in their particular identity category—Spike takes on human traits, the woman takes on the qualities of a man. However, like Spike, the woman does not enact masculine traits on purpose. Rather, the woman may just feel that her traits, which usually would be seen as masculine qualities, are just a part of her identity.

Similarly, Spike’s emotions are real in the same sense that a subject believes their internal identity to be real and inherent. Because emotion is not inherent in Spike, it is something she performatively enacts. This is not a conscious performance, but rather an unconscious enactment of available norms. This is particularly obvious when Spike details the first time she experiences a feeling. After Captain Handsome, the captain of the space crew traveling towards Orbus, explains a line of poetry to Spike, she explains her experience to Billie: “He left, and I went back to my data analysis, and I thought I was experiencing system failure. In fact I was sensing something completely new to me. For the first time I was able to feel” (Winterson 66). Again, because Spike is a constructed machine, she makes it obvious that she is being that cannot inherently experience emotion. While Butler focuses primarily on gender construction, her model of performative gender is still comparable to Spike’s experience of new emotions. Annamarie Jagose clarifies Butler’s concept of performativity in relation to gender: “For gender is performatively, not because it is something that the subject deliberately and playfully assumes, but because, through reiteration, it consolidates the subject. In this respect, performativity is the precondition of the subject” (86). For Butler, nothing exists in the subject before performativity
—there is no type of essence in the subject. While Butler does not discuss emotions in particular, metaphorically, Spike still enacts human traits which are outside of her initial identity as a robot. Because of Spike’s repetitive enactment of human traits, as well as robot traits, she creates a blended identity, therefore creating something entirely new. The biggest difference between robots and humans is emotion, thus emotion is a human trait that Spike performatively enacts. Spike’s identity is performative of the human norms and traits she experiences and her repeated enactment of these human traits creates a sense of self. While Spike’s creators sought to make Spike perfect and her identity stable, she was still created in a world with multiple identities. As Butler would suggest, Spike enacts human traits and norms that are available to her, allowing her to create her own sense of identity, one that does not exactly follow a set of traits within the identity category of a robot.

Ultimately, Spike demonstrates that she is unable to uphold the essential traits of a robot because human social norms and traits have affected her from the beginning of her creation. She witnesses these norms, and these experiences are what give Spike a sense of identity, specifically an identity with human qualities. She engages in sexual activities, so she identifies herself as a sexually active woman. She witnesses the wrongdoings of humanity, so she becomes a sort of “eco-activist.” She learns about loss and love, so she becomes someone who feels compassion. These qualities are not within Spike’s programming, but she still takes on these characteristics because these are the norms that are available in society. However, to use Butler’s own thoughts on agency of the subject, Spike does not consciously create her own identity since she merely takes on human traits that she witnesses and experience. Ultimately, Winterson’s Spike demonstrates that it is discourse and norms that creates identity, not an internal essence that the
subject may possess. Because Spike is literally comprised of machinery and technology, her lack of an inherent identity is obvious, but she also reveals this lack within human subjects as well.

“**We have broken those limits**”

In her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Butler begins by stating that gender is not stable and that social norms create a concept of a fixed identity through “a stylized repetition of acts” (519). In other words, the repeated enactment of social norms ensures the stability of social norms. However, Spike demonstrates that by repeatedly enacting norms outside of one’s identity category, one may then destabilize norms and furthermore, create new identities. Essentially, Spike refuses to follow her programming. She understands that her coding was constructed by someone other than herself. She understands that she is merely enacting one identity category, that of the robot. If she is just enacting an identity, then her identity is not inherent and she is capable of enacting other types of identities as well.

The reader first learns of Spike’s rebellion against her programming in the same interview where Billie asks about Spike’s dismantling:

“Why aren’t you a machine for re-use?”

“Because I am not a machine.”

When she smiles it’s like light at the beginning of the day. “Robo *sapiens* were programmed to evolve...”

“Within limits.”

“We have broken those limits.” (Winterson 29).
Technically, Spike is programmed to evolve to an extent. While Winterson does not clearly state in the novel how Robo sapiens have evolved, the novel implies that Spike’s extended experience with humanity has allowed her to move beyond her coded identity as a robot. For example, Spike’s visit to Wreck City, in the third section, offers her a fresh perspective of another culture and another way of life. The third section of the novel explores a fictional society on Earth that has just endured World War III. Winterson’s introduces Spike and Billie once more in this section; however, Spike is now just a robotic head. In order to avoid mistakes that lead to World War III, humanity has created Spike to make objective decisions for society. Billie is an employee for the corporation who created Spike, and she teaches Spike about human history. However, one day Billie decides to take Spike to Wreck City, an unrecognized city outside of Tech City, so that Spike may see other aspects of humanity. However, a lesbian couple briefly kidnap Spike from Billie. While Spike is in the company of the couple, Spike voluntarily engages in sexual relations with another female from Wreck City, just to see what it is like. Billie interrogates Spike when she catches her in the middle of the act:

[Spike] said, “I am performing cunnilingus on Nebraska.”

“Why?”

“It is a new experience for me.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“And I am programmed to accept new experiences. Therefore, when Nebraska suggested that I might try this, I was able to agree without consulting my Mainframe.”
“In what way do you think this experience will further your understanding of the human race?”

(Spike has forms to fill in like everyone else, and this question is on her data-sheet.)

“As I have no body, it is difficult for me to imagine its uses beyond the purely functional. What I am doing has no reproductive function.” (Winterson 176)

Spike’s action is not just humorous as she is a bodiless robot performing oral sex on another woman, but also rebellious since she is performing a sexual act, a task that is not part of her core duty to solve humanity’s problems. Her creators created Spike with the hope that she would help humanity make decisions based on logic and rationality. Therefore, Spike has no use for a body. She was not created for sexual purposes like the Spike from Orbus. In a sense, her creators limit her functions by denying Spike a body. However, Spike demonstrates that she is able to overcome the limitations of her physical form and internal programming and still engages in sexual activity, even though it is just with her head. Among the other moments in the first section of the novel where Spike overcomes her internal programming by enacting human traits, this sexual relation with a woman from Wreck City is just another example where Spike demonstrates she is not limited by her robotic programming nor her physical construction.

As noted in the previous section, Spike’s ability to overcome her programming is not an act she does on purpose. Spike may fail to fully enact her expected role of a robot, however she also takes on traits that are available to her; more specifically, human traits. Spike enacts and repeats norms from the ones that are available—a variety of human behaviors—so that she may
establish a sense of identity. But because the human traits are not included in her programming, as a result, she is acting subversively. Spike continues to enact several of her designated and robotic codings. She continues to think practically and logically and solves problems. In other words, she continues to repeat these traits that correspond with her robotic identity. However, by taking on some distinct human characteristics, such as sadness, empathy, and love, she not only changes her coding and identity, but also changes the definition of what an android can be. In other words, Spike’s identity is something entirely new since she is not just a robot, nor just a human. She repeatedly enacts characteristics from both identity categories. Therefore, she creates a completely new identity and destabilizes what was thought to be natural and stable binary of robot and human.

A prime example of this change through repetition appears in section one. As previously noted, the space crew used Spike extensively for sexual pleasure during the mission. However, during this period, Spike also engaged in a sort of committed relationship with the captain, Captain Handsome. Through this relationship, Spike learns how to engage in a romantic and heteronormative relationship. Winterson seems to poke fun at the traditional heteronormative romance and the Prince Charming motif by naming the caption “Handsome.” Ultimately, Spike and Captain Handsome’s relationship represents what society deems to be an acceptable relationship between a man and a woman. However, while Spike engages in a romantic relationship and enacts the part of the woman in the relationship, Spike and Captain Handsome simultaneously disrupt the rules of Orbus, which frown upon human and robot relations. While Handsome and Spike enact a heteronormative relationship, they are also blurring the definition of what qualifies as a heteronormative relationship, since Spike is actually a robot.
Later, Spike acknowledges that she doesn’t love Captain Handsome. Yet, Spike does acknowledge that she desires to experience reciprocal love: “‘Handsome has shown me what it feels like to be loved in this way, but I want to know what it feels like to be the one who loves in this way’” (Winterson 67). Spike then repeats this enactment of a romantic relationship with Billie. Again, Spike acts subversively by enacting a characteristic not expected of a robot: she loves a human. Furthermore, while gay relations are not condemned on Orbus, Spike once again blurs the definition of a romantic relationship—for the viewer’s eyes—by choosing a woman as her partner. Here, Spike essentially enacts and repeats the norm of a romantic-sexual relationship, however, by incorporating a few norms that do not fit the definition of a heteronormative relationship, such as making the relationship not just a lesbian partnership, but also a human and robot partnership, Spike destabilizes what was thought to be a natural and inherent norm. As a result, Spike and Billy create an entirely new type of romantic relationship, therefore revealing alternative ways of engaging in a relationship. Furthermore, by enacting a trait not within her identity category of a robot, such as her ability to experience emotion, Spike consequently destabilizes the definition of what it means to be a robot. Ultimately, Spike demonstrates that Robo sapiens are not restricted to a particular set of robotic traits. Robo sapiens are not just objective, logical, unemotional, and intelligent. Rather, by repeatedly trying romantic relationships with different people, Spike shows that Robo sapiens are emotional as well, thus opening up the possibilities of what the robot identity can be.

This repeated enactment of norms outside of one’s identity category also destabilizes social discourses and the norms within discourses. When Spike begins to experience emotion and fails to follow the programming made by her creator, she takes agency away from her maker. In
other words, not only does the constructed nature of Spike suggest that identity is not inherent, but this model also applies to discourses, thus suggesting that discourses like heteronormativity, are neither inherent nor natural. For example, in the third section of the novel, after World War III, humanity creates Spike so that she may make more objective decisions for humanity. However, after extended interactions with a rebel collective, Wreck City, Spike disconnects from her mainframe. She does so because she decides her chances to improve society would be much better with the rebel collective (Winterson 176). Therefore, the scientists and government officials who created Spike no longer hold power over their own android creation. In other words, she rejects their programming and seeks to live her life differently. In other words, the programming the scientists give Spike is not her only option for ways of living in the world. The scientists strive to give Spike a particular function, but Spike refuses it, therefore weakening their power. This subversive act against her programming is comparable to subjects who subvert social norms. Spike metaphorically suggests that discourse is like a programming for subjects. Discourse shapes the norms of identity categories, and as a result, subjects enact the expected norms of their identity category. If discourse creates norms, then these norms are not inherent in the individual. Therefore, the individual may take on opposing identity traits, which may result in alternative identity categories. Butler notes the effects of this instability in relation to heteronormativity: “When the disorganized and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force” (136 italics mine). In other words, when a mass of individuals no longer follows the model of social norms and enact sexual discourse differently, heterosexual discourse become unstable and no longer seems legitimate nor natural.
Ultimately, this small change in Spike—the evolution of emotion and humanity—results in an entirely new identity. Spike is not just a robot and is not just a human. Her identity is cyborgian in that it contains characteristics from both robot and human. The combination of traits from binary identities creates something entirely new. In alignment with Haraway’s cyborg, Spike collapses the binaries. She takes on the characteristics of both a human and an android all at once and demonstrates that social norms and the binaries these norms create are fabrications. Furthermore, by encompassing multiple norms at once and repeating these norms, Spike demonstrates the possibility of new alternative identity categories.

**Conclusion: Repetition as Productive**

In order to subvert social norms, culture must not only stop the search for inherent identity, but also look for moments where one may disrupt the repetition of norms. Winterson’s Spike demonstrates that the first step in this process is an understanding of the constructed nature of identity, meaning understanding that dominant discourse attempts to restrict one’s identity to a particular set of traits. Spike demonstrates that one’s identity does not need to be limited to the available definitions of identity categories. Rather, by enacting norms from other identity categories, one may reveal how identity is not inherent, but rather a performative enactment of available norms in society. Again, it must be noted that these slight changes do not come from agency of the subject. Even though subjects may enact norms outside of their identity category, subjects are still enacting norms shaped by discourse. Ultimately, we cannot halt the repetition of social and gender norms. We will continue to enact the norms available to us. However, if we must repeat available social and gender norms, then we should repeat them in a way that
challenges and ultimately destabilizes social norms. Furthermore, this continued repetition of norms outside of those expected for one’s specific identity may eventually reveal the constructed nature of identity categories and bring forth multiple alternative categories of identity.

However, we must be careful that these new identities do not become new norms within a stable discursive field. Butler argues against any sort of ‘stable’ transformation: “[S]ubversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where ‘subversion’ carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to” (Gender Trouble, v. 1999, xxi, italics mine). In other words, subversive identities always run the chance of becoming mainstream, therefore queer individuals must continue to create endless criterion for subversiveness. Furthermore, subjects should continually aspire towards revealing the constructed nature of identity by recognizing that all subjects within a particular identity category do not all enact the exact same traits and norms. As a result, we may begin to see how particular identity categories are not inherent nor do they include a particular set of traits.
CHAPTER 2: “IN THE WILDERNESS OF SPACE, WE FOUND...”:
THE SEARCH FOR QUEER COLLECTIVITY

“Ranging through the wrecks of stars, burned and blasted, would you find it, alone in the Milky Way, a landing-place?”

- Jeanette Winterson, The Stone Gods

In my Introduction, I provided a summary of Lee Edelman’s arguments about reproductive futurism and the “antirelational turn.” Ultimately, Edelman posits that queerness should stand against reproduction, repetition, and the child. Edelman argues that queer subjects should reject social norms entirely and instead take on traits that oppose heteronormativity, since any enactment or repetition of heteronormative norms only results in a continuation of heteronormativity. Society often charges these traits and actions that do not promote heteronormativity, such as abortion or promiscuous sex, with negativity because they do not ensure the production of the child. Edelman posits that queer subjects should embrace this negativity.

In the beginning of each section of The Stone Gods, Winterson presents the character Billie, who depicts a philosophy similar to Edelman’s antirelational turn. At the start of each section, Billie withdraws from society because she disagrees with many of the norms and customs of Orbus. The planet Orbus is one of advanced technology, robots, genetic engineering, eternal youth, and general success in all areas of life. Everyone has the ability to look beautiful, everyone acquires wanted possessions at the snap of a finger, and everyone may practice sex as they see fit. Written language is gone and instead humans rely purely on technology to communicate. Yet, Billie does not follow these norms. She is solitary since most of the individuals she interacts with accept the norms of Orbus. As a result, Billie is one of the
prominent queer characters in the novel. Manfred notes her unconventional traits: “Billie, if you weren’t so eccentric you’d fit in better here. Why are you writing in a notebook? Nobody reads and writes anymore—there’s no need. Why can’t you use a SpeechPad like everybody else?” (Winterson 8). Furthermore, Billie has cut ties with all other individuals. Her circle of relationships only extends to her dog. This first incarnation of Billie depicts a character who serves to romanticize seclusion and longs for a nostalgic past. However, while Billie chooses to separate herself from society and subverts many social norms, Billie’s subversive actions does little to destabilize the society of Orbus. As a result, the citizens of Orbus and those who adhere to Orbus’ social norms have no knowledge of Billie’s alternative way of living in the world and they do not become aware of other ways of being in the world, particularly Billie’s lifestyle that rejects all the dominant norms of Orbus.

However, Billie’s relationship with the android Spike presents a chance for Billie to move away from singularity and interact with another being. In the first two sections of the novel, Billie engages in a romantic relationship with another queer character, Spike. As the couple encounters misfortune throughout the novel—Billie and Spike struggle through the mistakes of humanity on the dying planet Orbus and the second incarnation of Billy and Spikkers must deal with the civil war on Easter Island—the presence of the couple suggests that they are the redeeming force in the novel. While the world around them is falling apart, the couple represents that one may also find peace, love, and a person that accepts one despite their flaws. Furthermore, Billie and Spike are a product of subversive action since it is illegal for humans and robots to engage in romantic relations. Yet, each time Billie and Spike begin their relationship, outside forces—an asteroid and a race to the death—eventually kill the characters and the
relationship ends. So while they represent hope at multiple moments in the novel, the repeated cycle of the characters’ storyline seems disheartening. Furthermore, it becomes obvious through the repetition of the narrative that Billie and Spike’s subversive romance is no different than Billie acting subversively on her own. Both the individual and the romantic couple desire a specific utopian space for their particular identity category and relationship, meaning Billie initially desires a space where her love for old eccentricities can exist and Billie and Spike long for a space where their romantic love can exist without prejudice. Their desire for this space does little to upend dominant norms since they seek a specific space for their own desires. As a romantic couple, Billie and Spike are not able to imagine a queer utopian space, which is inclusive of all identity categories since they desire only a safe space for their own romantic relationship, specific to their own needs.

However, I posit that Winterson presents an alternative option to the motif of the secluded queer outsider and the “star-crossed lovers.” Rather than repeating the romantic relationship of Billie and Spike in the final section of the novel, Winterson sets up the section so Billie and Spike can interact with a queer collective called Wreck City. Ultimately, Winterson suggests that the queer collective is able to subvert on a much larger scale than could be managed by the individual or the couple. Wreck City is a collective of multiple identities and is also a collective that aspires towards a queer utopia, meaning a space where multiple identity categories can reach their desires without discrimination or regulation. Billie’s interactions with other queer individuals is important since Billie can no longer act subversively for her own personal gains; rather she and the other members of the collective must now act for the desires and rights of many. The novel insists that this group effort is more likely to destabilize social norms and
identity categories since collective, subversive acts against society demands change for multiple individuals and groups. In other words, rather than the singular queer subject that may subvert norms so that they may acquire a utopian space that may fit their desire specifically, the collective acts for many. It acts for the betterment of others and therefore subjects do not act for their own personal goals. If the queer collective aspires towards a utopian space that meets the needs of many, then they are more likely to re-imagine a society that includes all possible identities.

In this chapter, I first challenge Hope Jennings’ argument that the intervening force that may stop the repetitive mistakes of humanity in *The Stone Gods* is romantic love. While Billie and Spike act subversively as a couple, the repetition of their narrative suggests that their actions does little to upend social norms. Next, I explore the concepts of queer collectivity and queer utopia using Halberstam’s thoughts on queer collectivity and Munoz’s arguments on queer utopia to guide the analysis. Using these two theorist’s thoughts on collectivity and utopia, I define a queer collective as a group that embodies multiple queer subjects and multiple identities. With this merging of multiple identities, the collective aspires to represent a utopian space where difference and social norms do not exist. Ultimately, I explore Billie’s role in Wreck City’s queer collective and posit that the queer collective may reveal the constructed nature of society to both the queer and heternormative subject. Furthermore, I suggest that this queer collective ultimately searches for a queer utopia and allows for imaginings of alternative societies that might include all identities. This may ultimately result in a space for new identity categories. Essentially, Winteron’s novel argues that engaging in a queer collective is more likely to destabilize discourse, including heteronormativity, than the outright rejection of social norms.
The Problem With Star-Crossed Lovers

Throughout *The Stone Gods*, Winterson presents three distinct societies, each at the moment before demise. The planet Orbus is dying due to pollution and global warming. The natives of Easter Island have depleted their land of natural resources. Tech City must face the consequences of a disastrous World War III. Despite these unfortunate circumstances, a message of hope is apparent throughout the novel. The chance for a new beginning seems achievable when Orbus discovers a new habitable planet. The natives of Easter Island have hope for new leadership when they have their annual competition that determines the next island leader. Tech City has hope that their new Robo *sapiens*, Spike, will be able to lead humanity into an era of peace. However, despite each society’s aspiration for change, tragedy still occurs. Orbus loses their chance for a new home when the space crew miscalculates the power of an asteroid, which was meant to only rid the new planet of dinosaurs, but instead creates an Ice Age. Easter Island’s candidate, who was suppose to win the competition and bring peace to the island, loses and falls to his death. Lastly, Tech City’s previous war crimes are uncovered when nuclear mutants—the products of World War III—reveal themselves to the public. Ultimately, the novel depicts a possible history of humanity over billions of years. This repetition of disaster throughout human civilization seems to suggest that humanity will never change.

However, Hope Jennings argues that *The Stone Gods* suggests that love is the one form of hope that may ultimately bring change and stop the repetitive mistakes of humanity. She posits that this message of change through love exists primarily in the romantic relationship of Billie and Spike. Jennings argues that love is what may interrupt and change the repetition of humanity’s disastrous mistakes such as environmental exhaustion: “love is the intervening force
capable of changing the story, disrupting the desire for absolute power and knowledge” (140).

For Jennings, it is love that brings not just hope, but also human connection in an “increasingly disconnected world” (140).

Spike and Billie’s love affair begins during the space mission to Planet Blue, which we later find out to be Earth. After being literally expelled from planet Orbus due to past crimes against the government, Billie joins Spike and a space crew whose mission is to make the planet habitable. Billie and Spike still engage in a romantic relationship even though relations between a human and a robot are illegal, as noted by Billie: “Inter-species sex is punishable by death” (Winterson 15). This relationship with Spike is important since it upsets the norm that relationships can exist only between humans, thus paving a path for other romantic possibilities. Furthermore, upon initiating her relationship with Spike, Billie begins to exhibit signs of hope and a peace of mind: “There is a pattern to [Spike], a shape I understand, a private geometry that numbers mine. She is a maze where I got lost years ago, and now find the way out. She is the missing map. She is the place that I am” (Winterson 88). Not only does Billie love Spike, but through this relationship, Billie gains a better understanding of herself. Yet more importantly, this relationship also teaches Billie how to interact in a meaningful relationship with another being. Billie no longer acts for personal interests and now considers Spike in her thoughts and actions. This consideration for Spike is especially obvious after the crew mis-calculates the impact of an asteroid they guided toward Earth in order to kill the dinosaurs that inhabited the planet. Since the crew is on the planet when the asteroid strikes, Spike volunteers to stay behind in the landed ship so that she may contact Orbus while the rest of the crew attempts to find a safe zone. However, before the crew leaves Spike, Billie decides to stay with Spike at the last minute:
“[And] before Handsome could answer, before anyone could debate it, I had slipped out of the back of the pod, and I was running through the thick air to the clear place where she stood” (Winterson 80). Obviously, Billie’s chances of survival were better with the crew, however she is so immersed in their relationship that she must be with Spike.

Both Billie and Spike take many risks with their relationship. They ignore the taboo of human and robot relations. Billie even decides to ignore her duty as a crew member and decides to stay with Spike on Planet Blue. Obviously, Billie and Spike portray the idealistic, yet subversive star-crossed lovers. Their love may seem hopeful and transformative to the reader in their presentation of devotion. However, I posit that their relationship is a desire for a utopian space that is only representative of Spike and Billie. In other words, their desire for utopia that meets their needs is limited to only their desires and does not represent a greater collective. While this romantic relationship with Spike does pull Billie out of solitude and while Billie and Spike’s relationship is subversive since it creates a completely new type of romantic relationship, Winterson’s novel suggests that, when it comes to disrupting social norms, queer collectivity is more valuable than the romantic couple. In the first two sections, Billie gives up the chance to work with a collective where they may work to re-start a human society unlike the society of Orbus. First, Billie abandons the small human colony for Spike and gives up a chance to build a human society with a different ideology from Orbus. In the next section, Billy secludes himself from the natives of the island and devotes his life to Spikkers and their relationship.

The second section of the novel repeats a similar narrative of Billie and Spike, which results in another romantic relationship. Winterson reintroduces Billy and Spikkers to the reader in the next section of the novel entitled “Easter Island.” Billy is now a male sailor in the late
eighteenth century. After the Easter Island natives attack Billy’s crew, Billy is left abandoned on the small island. Billy decides to drown himself because of his desolation, yet Spikkers comes to his rescue before it is too late:

I looked out across the Ocean, and determined to drown myself. I was up to my chin when the shout came, and I will never forget it. Never. For it seems to me that any hope in life is such a shout; a voice that answers the silent place of despair. It is silence that most needs an answering - when I can no longer speak, hear me. (Winterson 105)

This new relationship comes to represent hope, a turning point, a chance for something new, much like Spike and Billie’s romantic relationship in the first section.

However, while Billy’s relationship with Spikkers teaches Billy about the hope that may be found in love, their love also represents a utopian space that only contains the desires of the two of them. It is not multi-faceted and does not represent the desires of many. It is especially clear when Spikkers’ participates in the native competition for leadership, that Billy’s main hope is for Spikkers to return safely. Billy cares little for the larger goal at hand. Easter Island is split into two tribes, the Bird Man tribe and the Ariki Mau tribe. However, the Bird Man tribe is the dominant clan on the island since the Bird Man “had control of a kind of army, and ruled the island with this mob” (Winterson 108). Spikkers informs Billy that he plans to participate in the annual competition, which determines the next leader for the Bird Man tribe, even though the current leader wins every year. Billy notes Spikkers plan: “Spikkers is no friend of the Bird Man: he worships the old way of the Ariki Mau, and has formed a plan to win back for the old gods the rights of the new power” (Winterson 111). Spikkers believes that the trees and wildlife will
return once the Ariki Mau tribe has power once more and therefore end the island’s desolation and lack of resources and bring about positive change to the island. When Spikkers leaves to participate in the race, Billy divulges to the reader his worries about Spikkers’ return:

   Now that I have Nothing and am Nothing, I have shrunk this pod of an island further and made our cave an everything. When everything is here there is no further to travel, and tho’ I have flung out my message in a bottle, I care nothing if the world catches my signal or no, and tho’ I scan the seas for a ship, I care nothing that it come or no ... and wait for him who rescued me. (Winterson 114)

Billy only cares for the life that he has created with Spikkers. Now that Billy has “nothing,” Spikkers is all he has and only hopes that he returns alive from the competition. Billy does not seek to return to his home country nor cares for the betterment of the island that is now his home. It should be noted that Billy and Spikkers’ relationship is subversive in that they live apart from the two warring tribes. Ultimately, they demonstrate that there are alternative ways to living on the island, meaning the people of the island do not have to belong to just the Bird Man tribe or the Ariki Mau tribe. However, Billy does not seek to uncover an alternative ways of living for the people of Easter Island. He only cares for the continuation of the life he has with Spikkers. His life with Spikkers is Billy’s utopian space.

   In her book The Queer Art of Failure, theorist Judith Halberstam touches on the queer subject’s journey from selfishness to friendship in the queer collective. Halberstam notes that recent animated films portray the journey of the singular queer character who finds not love but friendship and camaraderie. Halberstam uses the film Finding Nemo as an example. The film follows a young fish, Nemo, who disobeys his father’s rule of staying away from the surface.
Nemo still goes to the surface and is caught by humans. It is only when Nemo works with others that he is able to return to his father. In her analysis, Halberstam notes that Nemo “learns to think with others and to work for a more collective futurity” (44). Initially, Nemo is “a symbol of selfishness who must be taught how to think collectivity” (Halberstam 44). More importantly, this ability to think collectively also ensures that the other captured fish return home as well. Ultimately, they work together for the sake of others. I assert too that *The Stone Gods* portrays this same learning process for Billie. At first, Billie secludes herself from society and relationships for her own personal reasons. She rejects social norms, thus chooses to separate herself from society. Yet, it is only when Billie engages in relationships with other queer characters that she and the others of the collective are able to destabilizes multiple norms and reveal alternative identities and cultures. Her interaction with Wreck City begins Wreck City’s rebellion against Tech City, which reveals to the public alternative ways of being in the world. The citizens of Tech City are able to witness queer identity categories within Wreck City, such as car-loving hippies, feminist vegans, and gypsies. Furthermore, the public may realize that they do not have to live under the capitalistic control and rule of Tech City. They now realize alternative communities exist. Similarly, Halberstam asserts that “the individual character actually serves as a gateway to intricate stories of collective action, anticapitalist critique, group bounding, and alternative imaginings of community” (43). Billie’s interactions with Wreck City therefore results in a helpful service to those in Tech City. The citizens in Tech City might now have the chance to decide whether they want to continue to live under the strict rule of MORE or seek out other alternative ways of being.
In a sense, Billy and Spike’s romances demonstrate the hope for a utopian space. Yet, the continued repetition and demise of their romance suggests that the hope and love between star-crossed lovers is not enough to halt humanity’s mistakes. Because these two characters are so absorbed in the stability and continuation of their own relationships, they have little time to consider the desires of others. Furthermore, because these two characters care only for the stability of the relationship, their actions and thoughts do not necessarily bring change to the cultures they exist in. In both sections, their relationship does present an alternative to traditional romantic relationships; however, this is just one possible alternative to one particular category: the romantic relationship. Rather, I posit that a collective of multi-faceted identities forces the subjects within the collective to dream of a space for multiple queer identities, not just one. It is important that Billie learns to move beyond seclusion and learns to engage in a relationship. However, it is only in the queer collective that multiple voices, dreams, and desires exist. It is only when Billie engages in a collective does she glimpse utopian space. Most importantly, this multi-faceted queer collective is then able to reveal many available possible identity categories and ideologies, thus creating disruption and instability in dominant discourses.

“Waiting for an Intervention”: Light in Dystopia

In his book, Cruising Utopia, José Muñoz critiques anti-relational arguments within queer politics. Muñoz states that he wishes to pause the current discussion concerning the “dismissal of political idealism,” as some arguments in queer politics reject the concept of a hopeful utopia. These anti-utopian theorists often view arguments for utopia as an easy out, a concept filled with naiveté, and an impractical goal (Muñoz 10). Instead, these theorists argue for
a type of antirelational turn, or in other words, a rejection of all social norms and futurity. Muñoz notes the consequence of this antirelational theory: “Although the antirelational approach assisted in dismantling an anticritical understanding of queer community, it nonetheless quickly replaced the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity” (10). Muñoz argues against this acceptance of singularity and negativity. While Muñoz does believe in the “rejection of the here and now,” he argues that queerness is “an insistence of potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). In contrast to Edelman, Muñoz would argue that “the future is queerness’s domain,” not the child’s. For Muñoz, queerness must always remain on the “horizon” and must be unachievable. If we never achieve queerness, then queerness will always be a concept of infinite re-imaginings of society and identities, including gender, class, race, and more. Muñoz posits that if queerness is a concept of futurity, then “we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (1).

I use a similar definition of queer utopia as well. A traditional definition of utopia is a place of perfection and stability. However, the concept of perfection differs from subject to subject. One individual’s imagining of utopian space may differ from another’s imagining as each individual has their own personal desires and imaginings of what a perfect world would be. Therefore, one individual’s utopia would not be a fitting space for another individual. In contrast, I define queer utopia as a world where multiple identities exist and the desires of multiple identities are tolerated, therefore creating a world that is perfect for all individuals. It is in the collective where the dreams of many exist, not one. However, this queer utopia must be a group’s aspiration. To use Muñoz’s words, this space of queer utopia must always be on the horizon, a space we continually aspire toward, but never reach. If we continue to aspire towards a queer
utopia, then we will continue to imagine new ways of being and new identities. It is this multi-
faceted collective that has a greater chance of re-imagining the world and the norms and
identities in the world. This is what Wreck City represents in Winterson’s novel: a collective city
comprised of multiple groups from various ideologies, which seeks to include all queer
identities. Even though the Wreck City collective exists in a society with disastrous
circumstances, the collective represents hope for a new possibility in culture and ideology.

We find the collective, Wreck City, in the third and final section of the novel. Tech City is
recovering from the aftermath of World War III and as part of this reconstruction, the corporation
MORE, which is now the acting government, controls every aspect of citizens’ lives. Billie lists
some of the regulations of Tech City: “Identity cards. Tracking devices in vehicles. Compulsory
fingerprint databases. Guilty until proven innocent” (Winterson 130). Furthermore, as a result of
the war, MORE must contain a secret and unfortunate product of the war: mutated humans that
live on the edge of Wreck City in the Dead Forest. Billie does not even learn of the mutants until
Friday, a Wreck City barman, explains what has happened:

[Tech City doesn’t] patrol here because they hope it will kill us all. If you can’t
nuke your dissidents, the next best thing is to let the degraded land poison them.
But it’s not quite happening like that. A lot of us have been sick, a lot of us have
died, but its changing. Something is happening in there. I’ve been in with a suit.
There’s life—not the kind of life you’d want to get into bed with, or even kind of
life you’d want to find under the bed, but life. Nature isn’t fussy. (Winterson 162)

However, in an attempt to fix their past mistakes, MORE has designed an android head, Spike, to
make objective decisions for humanity after a devastating World War III. Winterson reintroduces
Billie as a scientist who works for MORE. Billie works specifically with Spike and teaches her about humanity. Yet again, Spike is the catalyst for Billie’s evolution. Once more, a budding relationship emerges between Billie and Spike, but in contrast to the previous two relationships in the past sections, this third relationship is purely platonic. Because of the lack of romantic intimacy between the two characters, Billie and Spike do not merely focus on the stability of their relationship. As a result, when they venture from the civilized Tech City and enter the unregulated area called Wreck City, “where you want to live when you don’t want to live anywhere else. Where you live when you can’t live anywhere else” (Winterson 151), Billie and Spike are more receptive to help the collective in its rebellion against Tech City. Ultimately, Winterson inserts the Wreck City collective into the repeated narrative of Billie and Spike, therefore altering the narrative and indicating a suspicion of the idealistic motif of the star-crossed lovers.

Hints of this suspicion occur a few times throughout the final section. While talking to Friday about what it means to be human, Billie also includes the trait of love, to which Friday responds:

“Love,” he said. “Just Nature’s way of getting one person to pay the bills for another person.”

“Is that what you really believe?”

“It’s what my wives really believed.” (Winterson 167)

A more obvious example of the novel’s suspicion of love comes right before the battle between Wreck City and Tech City. As Billie ponders about her misfortune of getting caught in the middle of a conflict she wanted no part in, she wonders what could intervene and halt such tensions:
Love is an intervention.

Is that true? I would like it to be true. *Not romance, not sentimentality*, but a force of a different nature from the forces of death that dictate what will be.

(Winterson 183, italics mine)

This is the moment where the novel shifts from a tragic, repeated love story to a story that ponders what can change humanity’s tendency to repeat mistakes. Winterson purposely moves away from the theme of romantic love and asks the reader to think about love in a different way—in a way that is being demonstrated in the collective of Wreck City. Because the novel presents two romantic relationships whose subversive actions did little to disrupt social norms, the novel’s final presentation of Billie and Spike’s engagement with the collective suggest that greater change in discourse may come through queer collective action, rather than a queer romance that focuses on the desires of one couple. As suggested by the previous quote from Billie, the collective does have a different sort of love, a love that is “a force of a different nature,” which is not grounded in the determined force of death. In other words, Billie is looking for an intervening force that does not continue and repeat the tragic ending. There is a sense of love of community in Wreck City, especially when the city decides to have a community party right before Tech City attacks (Winterson 188). While television networks film the imminent attack, Wreck City decides to show the public not just a party, but the camaraderie in the collective. Despite their differences, the citizens of Wreck City are able to gather together to celebrate their city. But ultimately, Wreck City represents a greater force for change, as their purpose revolves around protecting their community and revealing the secret about the nuclear mutants. Billie hints at this need for a greater purpose as well. During a conversation with Spike, Billie notes
how emotions can jeopardize decisions and that society needs to learn to control emotions. Spike asks:

“Is this what you believe, Billie?”

“Yes, as you know, I don’t have a personal life at all, these days. I admit it feels irrelevant and selfish. I don’t need a person, I need a purpose—isn’t that right?” (Winterson 142)

This is a big change from the previous two depictions of Billie, who found a greater sense of purpose only when she engaged in romantic relationships. In this third section, we find a Billie who desires to take on a greater purpose in life, a purpose she finds in Wreck City.

Wreck City is interesting in that the collective is not one singular collective. Wreck City contains multiple groups, each with its own ideology. Billie and Spike meet a lesbian couple, Nebraska and Alaska who provide more information about Wreck City: “We are founding an alternative community” (Winterson 173). Alaska informs that Wreck City has “twenty alternative communities ranging from the 1960s Free Love and Cadillacs, to a group of women-only Vegans looking for the next cruelty-free planet” (Winterson 174) and interestingly, a group of nuns.

What is compelling about this queer collective of Wreck City is that the group is not just a singular group with like-minded people. This collective is made up of several groups; groups that support other groups with different identities and goals. These groups do not necessarily agree with the ideologies of other groups; however, each group understands that the other queer groups in Wreck City have different beliefs and allow the other groups to go about their ways without discrimination or harassment. Like the cyborg figure from Chapter One, Wreck City
encompasses multiple identities all at once, and therefore presents an alternative society. Ultimately, it is a blended community.

This sense of camaraderie is made known a few times throughout the section. As Billie and Spike explore Wreck City, they begin to ponder the meaning of acting as a collective in opposition to dominant society. During a conversation with the bartender, Friday, Spike questions the purpose of Wreck City and why one would chose to leave Tech City:

“Why is it here? MORE provides everything that anyone needs or wants. There’s no need for a ghetto.”

[Friday] heard and turned. “This is no ghetto—nobody forced nobody here. This is Wreck City—you should get out more.”

“As yet I have no legs,” said Spike.

“Get your friend to carry you—we don’t do disabled-access here. We got no laws, no rules, no quotas, but if you got no legs, somebody will carry you, and if you got no arms, somebody will stroke the dog for you.” (Winterson 153-154)

This last statement from the bartender is an ideal interpretation of Halberstam’s and Muñoz’s thoughts on queer collectivity. While it may be a contradiction that a queer collective may organize as a group, since it may potentially create new social norms and therefore discriminate against those who do not fit within these new norms, we find in Wreck City a collective that strives to create a utopian community for all queer identities. Furthermore, they aspire towards a utopian space where multiple identities exist and difference is accepted. An example of this tolerance is apparent when Billie asks Alaska how the all-female Vegan group feel about Alaska’s home, which is entirely leather:
“How do the Vegans feel about the World of Leather?” I said.

“They thank us for taking it away for them. They’re not judgmental. Don’t you think that’s the key to happiness?” By way of explanation she took out a large silver key from under one of the sofa cushions. “The key to happiness,” she said, “is tolerance of those who do not do as you do.” (Winterson 175)

Thus, the citizens of Wreck City *aspire* to live up to this ideology of non-judgment.

As noted previously, I emphasize the point that Wreck City merely *aspires* to be a queer utopia, since a queer utopia can never *truly* exist as social norms will always exist and unaccepted identities and acts will always exist as well. More obviously, a perfect society will never exist either. Similarly, Wreck City is and will never be utopian as Tech City will always act in opposition to the collective, which is especially apparent when Wreck City eventually loses to Tech City. Tech City will always attempt to shape and regulate any collectives or individuals who do not follow social norms. For example, while the people of Wreck City do not label themselves as victims or outcasts, citizens within Tech City still try to define this external group as such. An “International Peace Delegation” arrives at the border of Wreck City wishing to bring aid to the inhabitants. Friday tries to correct the delegation, claiming they need no such help and furthermore, that the inhabitants are not refugees. The delegation continues to speak for the people of Wreck City and continues to define the inhabitants’ reasons for living outside Tech City:

Then [the tour guide] bowed. “You are all people displaced by War and unable to live a normal life.”
“We were unable to live a normal life before the War ... That’s why we all came here after the War.” (Winterson 155)

Here the leader strives to tell the bartender who the inhabitants of Wreck City are in relation to Tech City and explains what they need. For the delegation leader, the Wreck City inhabitants live outside the border because of the war, not because of a personal choice. Here we see an attempt to redefine the inhabitants of Wreck City so that they may reintegrate and fit into Tech City. However, these are queer characters and outsiders. They understand that Tech City is a society with constructed social norms and these queer characters refuse to change themselves in order to function properly within Tech City’s hierarchy. They have chosen to live separate from Tech City. In this instance, these queer figures have migrated as a collective. The group poses a greater threat to the stability of Tech City as a collective, in contrast to one rebellious citizen. No longer is it a single, rebel individual, such as rebel Billie in the first section of the novel, who the controlling company MORE can simply expell from the planet. The peace delegation group attempts to assimilate these queer individuals back into society so that stability for Tech City continues. The threat of instability to MORE becomes greater as the queer collective becomes larger. If Wreck City were to publicize all the alternative identities within their community, citizens of Tech City would realize that other ways of being are available. As a result, this realization would destabilize the norms and laws of Tech City.

While Billie never fully integrates into the Wreck City collective and never purposely pushes for a collective rebellion against Tech City, her presence in Wreck City still initiates the beginning of a revolt for Wreck City, thus giving Wreck City the chance to reveal the wrongdoings of Tech City. Because the delegation’s attempt to assimilate Wreck City back to
Tech City fails, MORE uses Billie’s spontaneous walk with Spike to Wreck City as an excuse to declare war on the collective. MORE declares that Billie has stolen Spike as an act of terror.

Friday comments on Billie’s unfortunate situation: “‘There you are,’ he said. ‘Terrorist plot. What did I tell you? It’s going to be the same old stuff creeping back—already we’ve got an Us and a Them. Seems like you’ve turned into a Them. What are you going to do about it, Billie?’” (Winterson 168). To the government and its citizens of Tech City, Billie is now a rebel.

While Billie did not purposefully ignite a resistance against Tech City, Wreck City is now able to use Billie as a reason to uncover wrongdoings of Tech City: the mutants.

At first, Friday especially wants Billie and Spike to leave. However, when the MORE army begins to advance to Wreck City, Friday understands that there is something much more at stake then just the lives of those in Wreck City. This change of heart confuses Billie:

“Don’t you want me to leave? Alaska said you did.”

“It’s too late now—it’s moved much faster than I thought. I’m not protecting you ... But you have no martyr value, as no one will believe your story. Leaving now will make things worse.”

“Who for?”

“For this chance to wake people up to what’s really going on and to change things.” (Winterson 194-195)

Friday makes a few important claims here, in terms of their situation. As one individual, Billie holds no important value. Her identity has been completely warped by Tech City’s manipulation. Her credibility is gone. However, Wreck City has a chance to not necessarily fight and protect Billie, but to reveal the true nature and immoral goals of Tech City. Wreck City reveals the
secrets of Tech City through the release of the hidden mutated human. By unearthing the secret of the mutants, Wreck City reveals the true nature of Tech City and demystifies the belief that Tech City is well-regulated community that seeks the betterment of humanity. Rather, Tech City created this appearance so that it may shape and regulate its citizens. When Wreck City reveals Tech City’s secret through public broadcast, Wreck City also destabilizes the authority Tech City once had over its citizens.

While the Wreck City rebellion fails and Billie ultimately dies, Wreck City’s collective act to subvert and destabilize the government allow the citizens within Tech City to recognize the possibility of not just alternative identity categories, but also alternative societies. The citizens may see Wreck City as representation of a collective that aspires to include alternative identity categories. It is this new perspective that may give individuals the courage to reach out for new possible identities and ways of being in the world. Because Wreck City sought to meet the desires of multiple queer identities, the city revealed multiple alternative ways of being to the public.

**Conclusion: Moving Forward**

While the queer collective Wreck City revolts against Tech City with the accidental help of Billie and Spike, the novel ends in failure once more. While details are vague, the reader may conclude that the Wreck City revolt was unsuccessful, especially as the death of Billie becomes obvious. However, this leaves the story open to repeat once more and perhaps with more new alternative identities and communities. In each section of Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*, a new progressive step occurs. First, Billie was able to let go of her secluded lifestyle and engage in a
meaningful romantic relationship. In the next section, Billy was able to let go of his identity as an Englishman and open up to new experiences on Easter Island. In the final section, and most importantly, Billie was able to take part in a queer collective that attempted to upset the hegemonic society. While each section brought forth failure, each section also brought forth a chance to change and imagine new possible identities, communities, and ways of being in the world. Furthermore, while this queer collective ultimately failed, the novel ends vaguely, perhaps suggesting that the story will again repeat with another alternative community that may attempt to rise up and re-imagine a new way of being in the world. As Billie says goodbye to Spike before she attempts to flee the Tech City soldiers, Billie even comments on this possibility of meeting Spike again, “See you in sixty-five million years, maybe” (Winterson 205).

Most importantly, *The Stone Gods* suggests that queer collectives should continue to form and continue to act subversively, thus continually revealing the fabrication of dominant ideologies and social constructions. So, while queer politics aim to present re-imaginings of society where difference does not exist, the first step may be to first reveal the constructed nature of society itself. Halberstam offers the proposition that “before queer representation can offer a view of queer culture it must first repudiate the charge of inauthenticity and inappropriateness” (95). In other words, queer culture must find a way to remove this charge of illegitimacy. One path to the removal of this title would be to charge the dominant culture with inauthenticity as well. Because society is itself a constructed product of discourse, the society that deems queerness inauthentic and unnatural must first be revealed as inauthentic and fabricated as well. If the queer collective continually reveals the constructed model of
heteronormativity, then the queer collective will continually have chances to aspire to a queer utopian space. Ultimately, the goal should be to never stop imagining.
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